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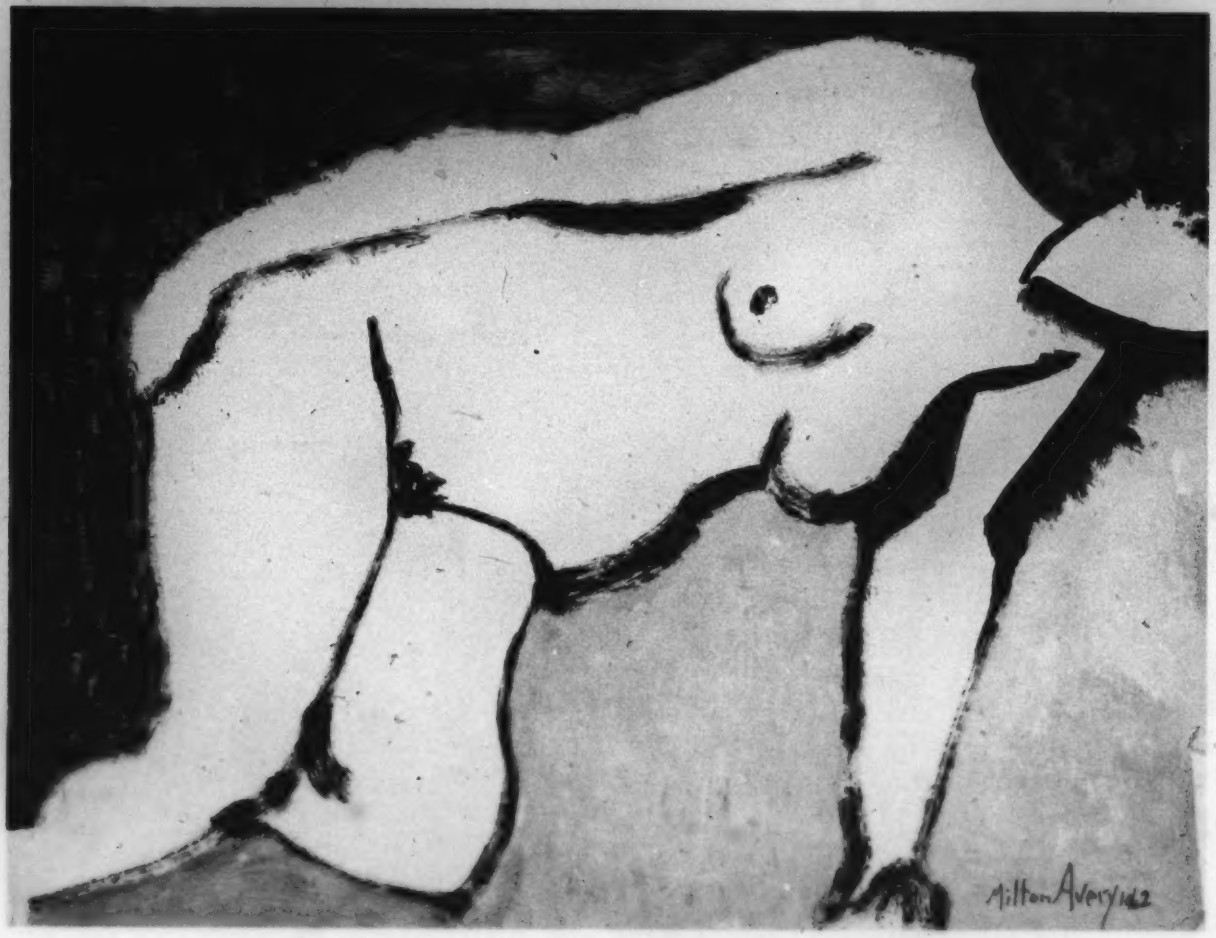
General



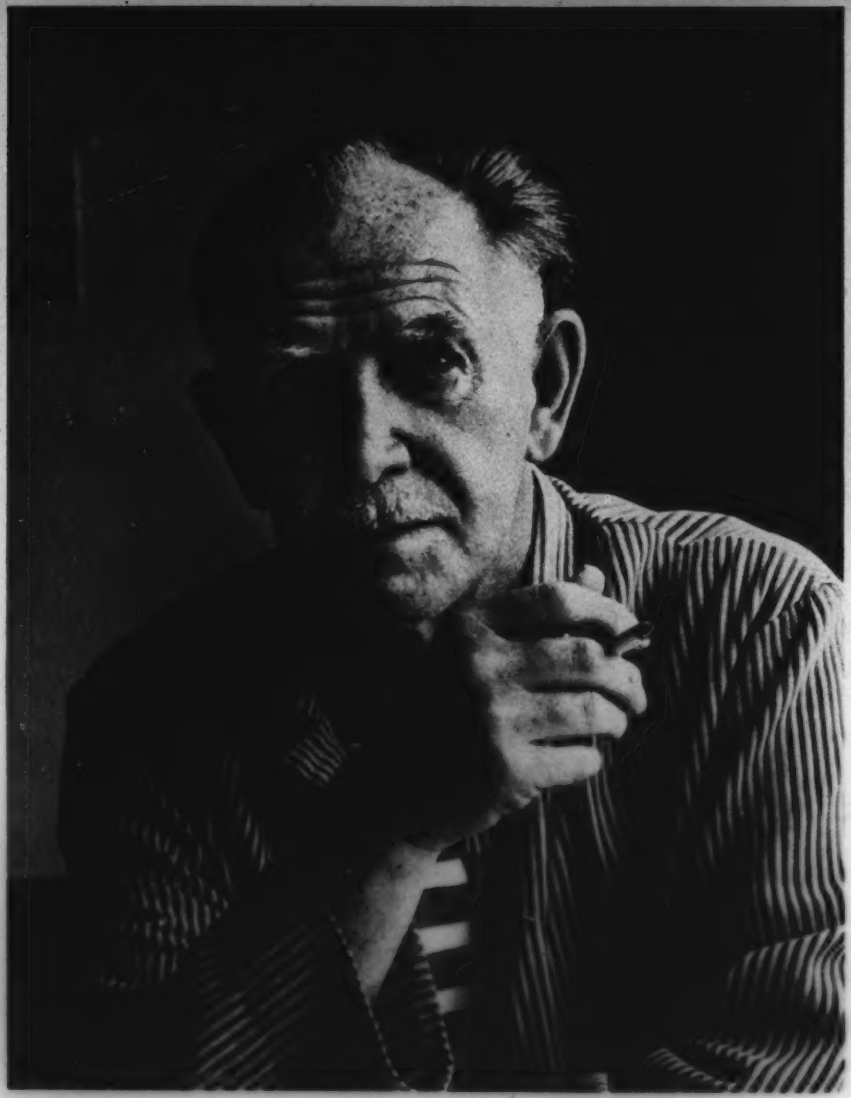
Milton Avery

MILTON AVERY DRAWINGS

Compiled with text by

BURT CHERNOW

Chairman of the Art Department
Director, Housatonic Museum of Art
Housatonic Community College
Bridgeport, Connecticut



3.

BIOGRAPHY

1893	Born March 7 in Altmar, New York
1905	Family moves to Hartford, Connecticut
1923	Studied at the Connecticut League of Art Students
1925	Painted in the Summer in Gloucester, Massachusetts, where he met Sally Michel; moved to New York City
1926	Married Sally Michel
1928	First New York exhibition at the Opportunity Gallery
1929	Logan Prize, Art Institute of Chicago
1930	Atheneum Prize, Connecticut Academy of Fine Arts
1932	Daughter March was born
1935	Exhibition at the Valentine Gallery, New York City
1935-1950	Frequent travels throughout North America
1943-1950	Work exhibited at Rosenberg & Co., and Durand-Ruel Gallery, New York City
1949	First Prize, Baltimore Watercolor Club
1950-1972	Exhibitions, Grace Borgenicht Gallery, New York City
1952	First visit to Europe
1959	Art USA award for painting
1960	Retrospective exhibition, Whitney Museum of American Art; Ford Foundation Grant
1962-1973	Exhibitions, Waddington Gallery, London
1965	Died on January 3, in New York City

4. Avery with Beret

5. Sketcher by the Sea

MILTON AVERY DRAWINGS

"In order to paint one has to go by the way one does not know. Art is like turning corners, one never knows what is around the corner until one has made the turn."[1]

Milton Avery

Since the Second World War, we have witnessed the tumultuous rise of American painting as an international force, as well as the momentous shift of the art world's center of gravity from Paris to New York City. Amid the clamor surrounding the historic developments of modern American painting, a growing number of museum curators, writers and particularly artists recognize Milton Avery as a central and singularly significant figure. Clearly, Avery is a quiet giant whose full importance in the triumph of American painting is only now becoming clear.

Many contemporary developments have taken both direction and inspiration from Avery's work, which itself is an integral part of the structure of modern art history. His work is, more than ever, an essential factor in the complex continuum of revolutionary concepts stretching from nineteenth century France through today.

Corot has said, "There are no movements in art, only personalities." This may be debatable, but not with reference to Milton Avery. His perceptive eye and educated vision were not directly related to any art movement, slogan or dogma. He remained remote from doctrine for three and one half decades, miraculously true to himself and his experiences. Avery's work does not fit into any of the movements which it influenced, but it goes beyond the major developments of American art in our time. His contribution to abstract expressionism is well known, and he is increasingly recognized for his powerful influence on

"That the younger 'anti-Cubist' abstract painters who admire Avery do not share his naturalism has not prevented them from learning from him any more than it has prevented them from admiring him. His painting shows once again how relatively indifferent the concrete means of art become where force of feeling takes over."[2]

Clement Greenberg

color field painting. American artists and a growing international audience have experienced a profound change in the way they perceive and think about art as a result of Milton Avery's work. It was not only for his contemporaries, but for succeeding generations of artists that Avery was able to create an enduring and poetic visual language from the most ordinary events of everyday life.

Mrs. Avery recalled that everything was his favorite subject.[3] The subject matter was ordinary or even commonplace, yet through some particular kind of magic, a nude, trees or rocks become extraordinary and we are left with the feeling that perhaps we never really looked at these things before. Could "ordinary" be nothing more than the wonders of life not seen through an awakened eye?

Avery has been called a noncombatant in a violent age[4] and Thoreau in the midst of the Gold Rush.[5] His works are concerned with both life and love, and are even more beautiful in their quiet eloquence when seen against the foil of a troubled and violent twentieth century. He accepts the human condition and the world lovingly, and we cannot help but do the same through his poetic eyes.

There was no separation of art and life for Avery. Everywhere he went was his studio, and he brought with him a sense of being at one with nature which permeated his work. This attitude of communion with all things around him translated ordinary things into

"Avery was one of the first to understand color as a creative means. He knew how to relate colors in a plastic way."

Hans Hoffman

a daring visual language of structural simplicity. What he left out of a picture was just as important as what he put in. His sophisticated and ascetic use of two-dimensional forms resulted in a subtle yet original body of work. Added to the sparseness of this work is the element of humor, or perhaps more accurately, a certain lightheartedness. Avery consistently chooses modesty and visual wit rather than the heavier attitudes of social criticism or psychological analysis.

Drawing was for Milton Avery a daily celebration of life which was to him as necessary and natural as breathing. His drawings appear to be effortless accomplishments with the fresh look of innovation. Avery was addicted to drawing, through which he formulated an inward vision that gave soul and substance to his work. With aesthetic resourcefulness, flat planes were locked together, each parallel to the picture surface, subjects were reduced to their fundamental contours, and each small universe was put into dramatic balance. A gesture or feeling was translated into a few significant lines, and simple forms were woven into a tightly articulated overall design. If design, distortion or pattern threatened the essential truth, it was the truth that prevailed in the work. If Avery was drawing a chicken or a chair, his primary concern was a specific identity or "chickenness" or "chairness," rather than simply using the subject matter as a vehicle for style. In "Chickens by the Dozen" (Plate 20), chickens are affectionately confronted in the drawing, not just manipulated. His drawings, despite expressive distortion, remain completely loyal

"There is scarcely a more refined aesthetic intelligence in American art than his . . . His imaginative integrity is large enough and pure enough to encompass both the limits of art and the limits of experience without violating either."[16]

Hilton Kramer

to his first vision and represent a direct confrontation with the subject at hand.

Avery was a man of quiet self-confidence and educated intuition. Behind the loose and easy and sometimes playful look of his drawings was an unmistakably firm control. For all the fluidity there is a solid understructure, a balance of spontaneous delicacy and rockbed framework. He often referred to the whole picture as being more important than any of its parts, and approached his drawings and paintings in a Gestalt manner. Perhaps what makes his drawings work so well is some beautiful combination of external truth and internal logic.

Every painting Avery did grew out of his drawings, with watercolors often an intermediate stage toward the oil paintings. He used a wide variety of materials including pencil, crayon and ink, producing thousands of drawings. These varied from notations similar to calligraphic shorthand . . . occasionally just a few lines . . . to numerous full and vivid finished drawings. In addition there were over 25 marvelous diary-like sketchbooks filled with studies for paintings in which color references are often noted on the drawings (as they are on several drawings included in this book).

Milton Avery was particularly impressed by Oriental brush painting and its austere directness. He usually selected the most direct media available for his drawings and prints. When the flobrush or felt tip

"It is the first vision that counts. The artist has only to remain true to his dream and it will possess his work in such a manner that it will resemble the work of no other man — for no two visions are alike."

Albert Ryder

pen was first introduced about 1946, Avery immediately adopted and used it with great frequency. By 1946, the process of drawing was for him as effortless as thinking. The strength and fluidity of the flobrush had an obvious appeal to a man of Avery's temperament and talent. There was nothing tentative or safe about the flobrush, there were no flobrush erasers and Avery did not need one. The resulting drawings were as fresh and unlabored as any in art history. The sureness of Avery's hand is unmistakably evident in the flobrush drawings reproduced in this book.

He never stopped drawing directly from the model, and attended weekly sketching classes until the Summer of 1960 when serious illness prohibited him from continuing. Certainly, drawing and painting the figure was a major factor in Avery's oeuvre. The figures were mostly female and seem animated in spite of tightly organized compositions. Even though the figures are simplified and almost generalized they usually maintain an insistent individuality. Avery's descriptive contour line and probing aesthetic intuition grew out of a consciousness of the unique existential wholeness of each figure. In Avery's drawings the recurring theme of the figure presents the viewer with a tour de force that is one of the artist's major accomplishments.

The other central themes are landscape and the sea. In "Josephine Lake" (Plate 54) we see a landscape which makes pure use of the artist's personal vocabulary. The drawing is informal and lyric, and

"For Avery was a great poet-inventor who had invented sonorities never seen or heard before. From these we have learned much and will learn much more for a long time to come."[8]

Mark Rothko.

everything is just right without ever referring to formal perspective. His lines break and turn as naturally as wind blown branches or waves along the New England shore. A sheet of paper was not just drawn upon, but provided Avery with an environment where the open spaces were as vital as color. "Nine Maine Sketches" (Plate 30) is an important condensed series of studies, many of which were later developed into major seascape paintings. Each of the serial-like boxes is both intimate and very much alive. They illustrate dramatically Avery's ability to get to the heart of his subject without ever losing sight of the central issue.

Avery drawings are an important legacy with rewards as rich and subtle as those to be found in his paintings. The flobrush drawings could not be modified as the watercolors and oils were; they required a precision and authority that sets Avery apart as a major draftsman of our time. The drawings offer the most accurate and unmodified view of Avery's first vision, giving us a point of enlarged focus on his creative genius. Adventurous drawing never hesitates to take risks, and Milton Avery, with all his apparent restraint and pictorial grace always kept "turning corners."

Burt Chernow

6. Sketch Class

DRAWINGS

1. Cover, *"Nude Reclining,"* 1962
   Oil on paper 17½ x 22½
2. Back cover, *"Three Nudes Standing,"*
   Flobrush 14 x 17
3. Photograph of Milton Avery by
   Marvin Lazarus
4. *"Avery with Beret,"* 1951
   Flobrush 11 x 8½
5. *"Sketcher by the Sea,"* 1948
   Flobrush 8¾ x 13¾
6. *"Sketch Class"*
   Flobrush 14 x 17
7. *"Powerful Woman"*
   Flobrush 17 x 14
8. *"Hefty Girls"*
   Flobrush 14 x 17
9. *"Dark Rocks,"* 1947
   Flobrush 17 x 14
10. *"Jagged Rocks,"* 1947
    Flobrush 17 x 14
11. *"Sitting and Standing"*
    Flobrush 14 x 17
12. *"Three Studies"*
    Flobrush 14 x 17
13. *"Shy Girl"*
    Flobrush 17 x 14
14. *"Saucy Nude"*
    Flobrush 17 x 14
15. *"Beach Series"*
    Flobrush 17 x 14
16. *"Quarry Bathers"*
    Flobrush 17 x 14
17. *"March Seated,"* 1949
    Flobrush 11 x 8½
18. *"Mother and Daughter,"* 1949
    Flobrush 8½ x 11
19. *"Still Life on Chair,"* 1949
    Flobrush 8½ x 11
20. *"Chickens by the Dozen,"* 1947
    Flobrush 14 x 17
21. *"Woman Alone"*
    Flobrush 17 x 14
22. *"Draped Nude"*
    Flobrush 17 x 14
23. *"More Afghans,"* 1954
    Flobrush 11 x 8½
24. *"Afghans"*
    Flobrush 8½ x 11
25. *"Three Sketches,"* 1949
    Flobrush 14 x 17
26. *"Six Sketches"*
    Flobrush 14 x 17

27. *"Three Graces"*
Flobrush 14 x 17

28. *"Sitter by the Sea"*
Flobrush 14 x 17

29. *"Edge of Forest,"* 1953
Flobrush 11 x 8½

30. *"Nine Maine Sketches,"* 1949
Flobrush 14 x 17

31. *"Sketcher on the Rocks,"* 1949
Flobrush 14 x 17

32. *"Sleeper by the Sea,"* 1948
Flobrush 8 x 13¾

33. *"Formidable Woman,"* 1947
Flobrush 17 x 14

34. *"Sturdy Nude,"* 1948
Flobrush 17 x 14

35. *"Pensive Nude"*
Flobrush 17 x 14

36. *"Amazon,"* 1949
Flobrush 17 x 14

37. *"Rocks and Sea"*
Flobrush 17 x 14

38. *"Two Seascapes,"* 1948
Flobrush 17 x 14

39. *"Victorian Interior,"* 1949
Flobrush 8½ x 11

40. *"Florida Sketcher,"* 1950
Flobrush 11 x 8½

41. *"Dolia"*
Flobrush 17 x 14

42. *"Figures,"* 1950
Flobrush 14 x 17

43. *"Turbaned Model"*
Flobrush 17 x 14

44. *"Two Nudes Resting"*
Flobrush 14 x 17

45. *"Beached Boats"*
Flobrush 11 x 8½

46. *"Seagulls by the Sea"*
Flobrush 14 x 17

47. *"Nude with Folded Arms,"* 1948
Flobrush 14 x 17

48. *"Nude with Robe"*
Flobrush 17 x 14

49. *"Nude Seated"*
Flobrush 17 x 14

50. *"Two Girls,"* 1956
Flobrush 14 x 17

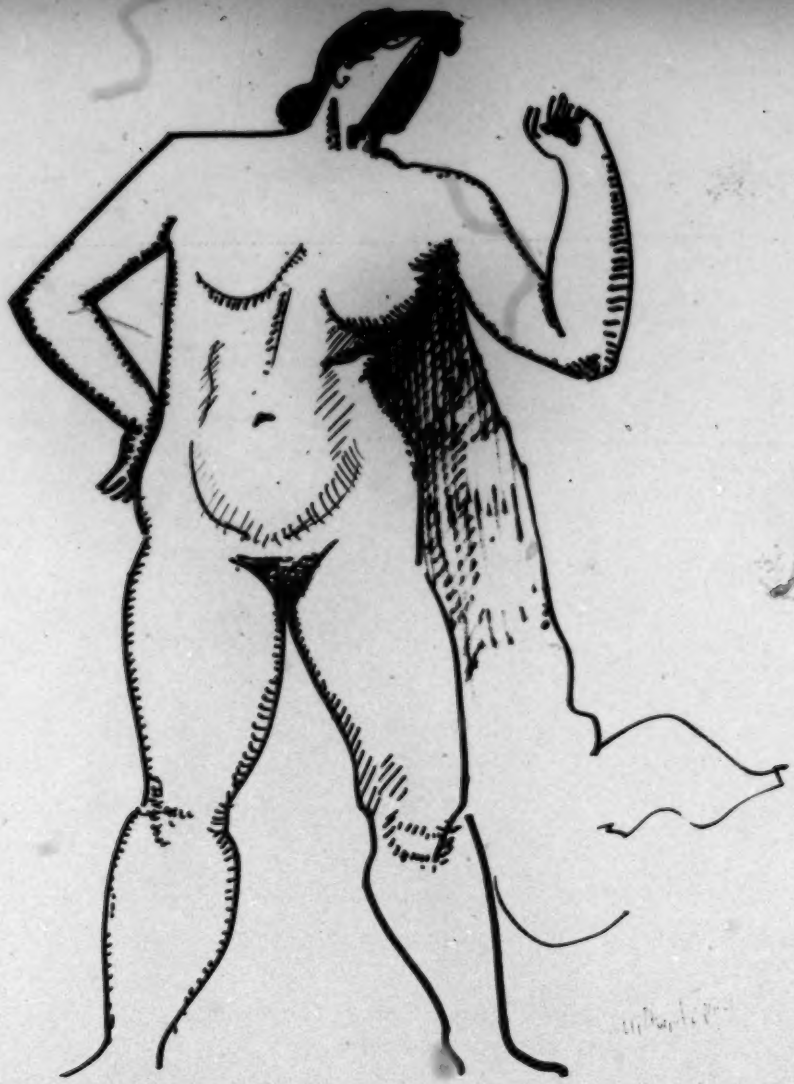
51. *"Nude Reclining,"* 1948
Flobrush 17 x 14

52. *"Nude Reclining #2,"* 1956
Flobrush 14 x 17

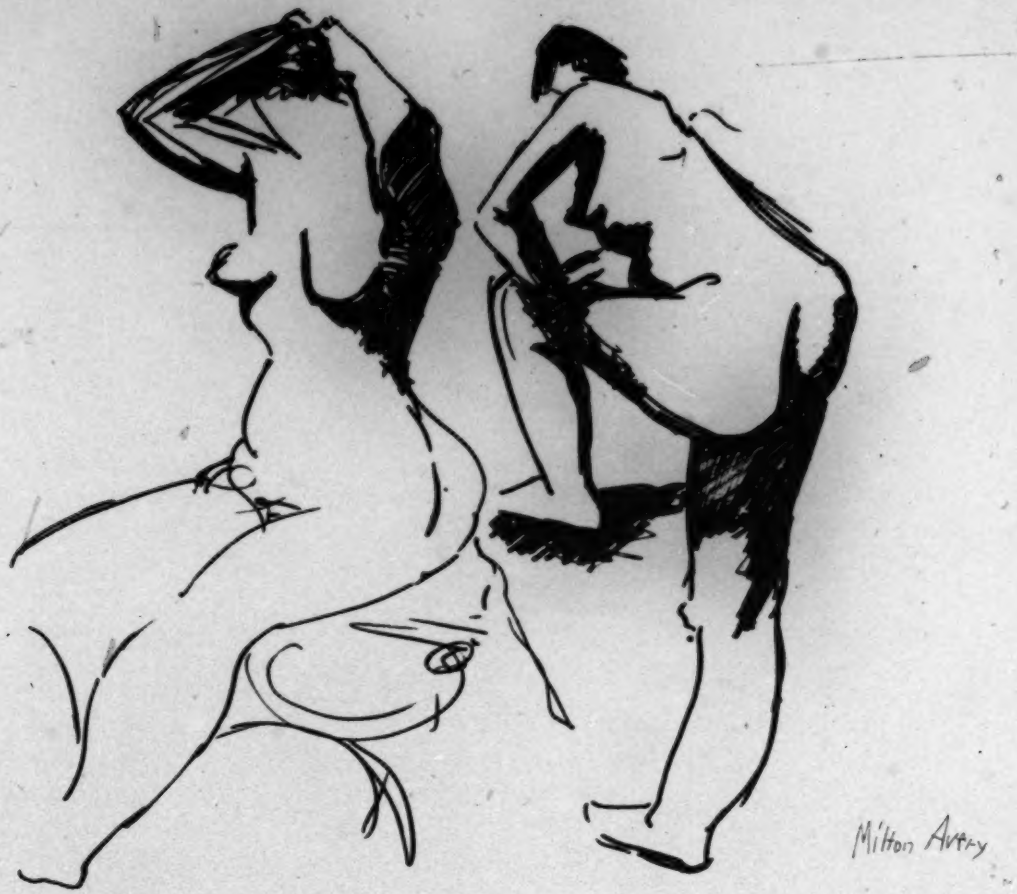
53. *"Sea and Dunes,"* 1957
Flobrush 8½ x 11

54. *"Josephine Lake,"* 1947
Flobrush 14 x 17

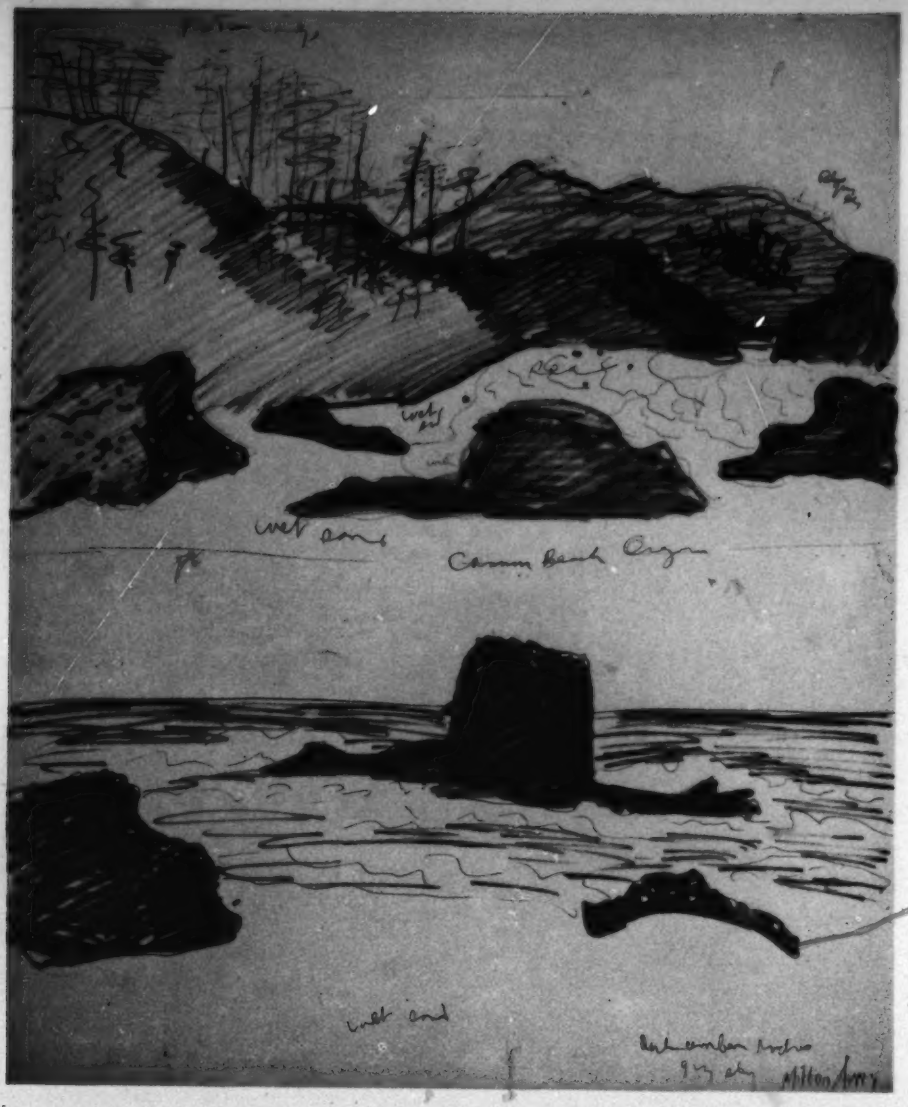
Dimensions are given in inches with height preceding width. Each of the drawings is signed by the artist.



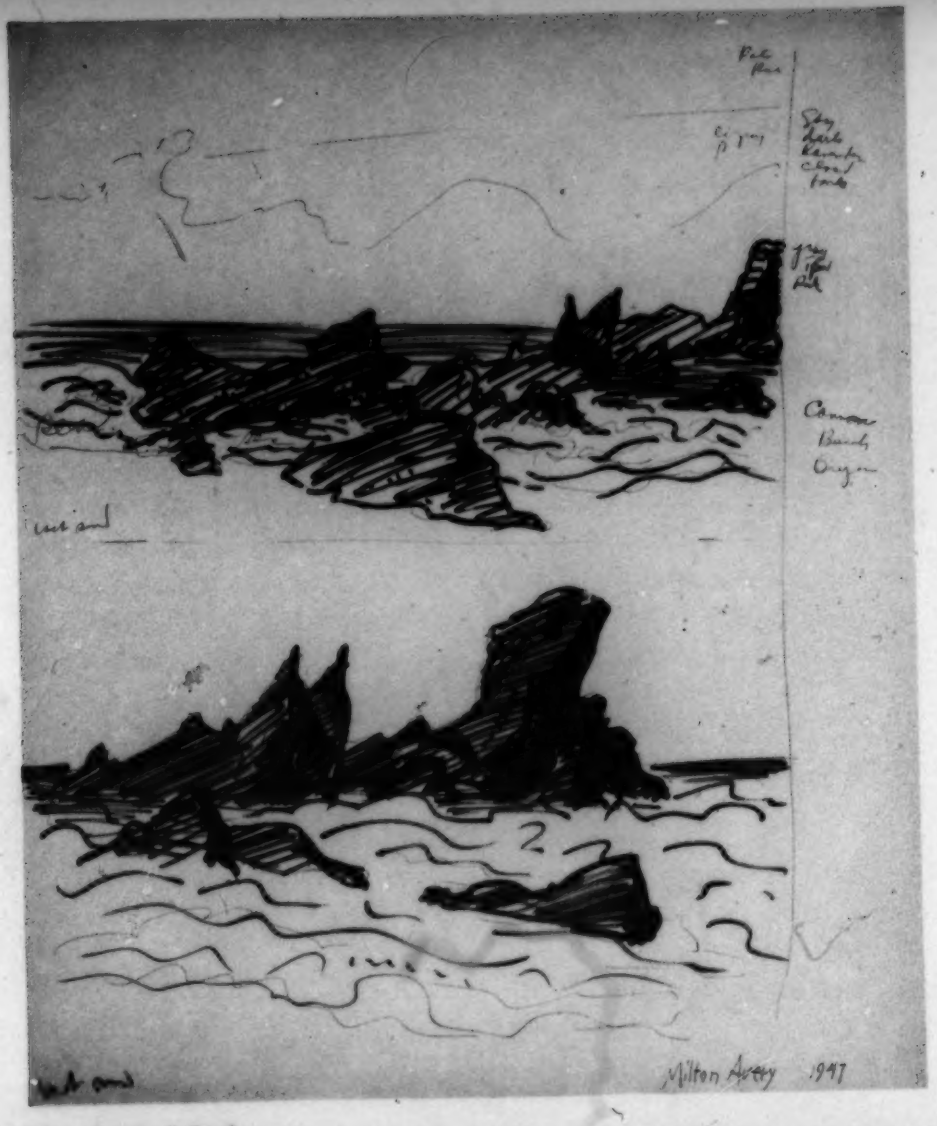
7. Powerful Woman



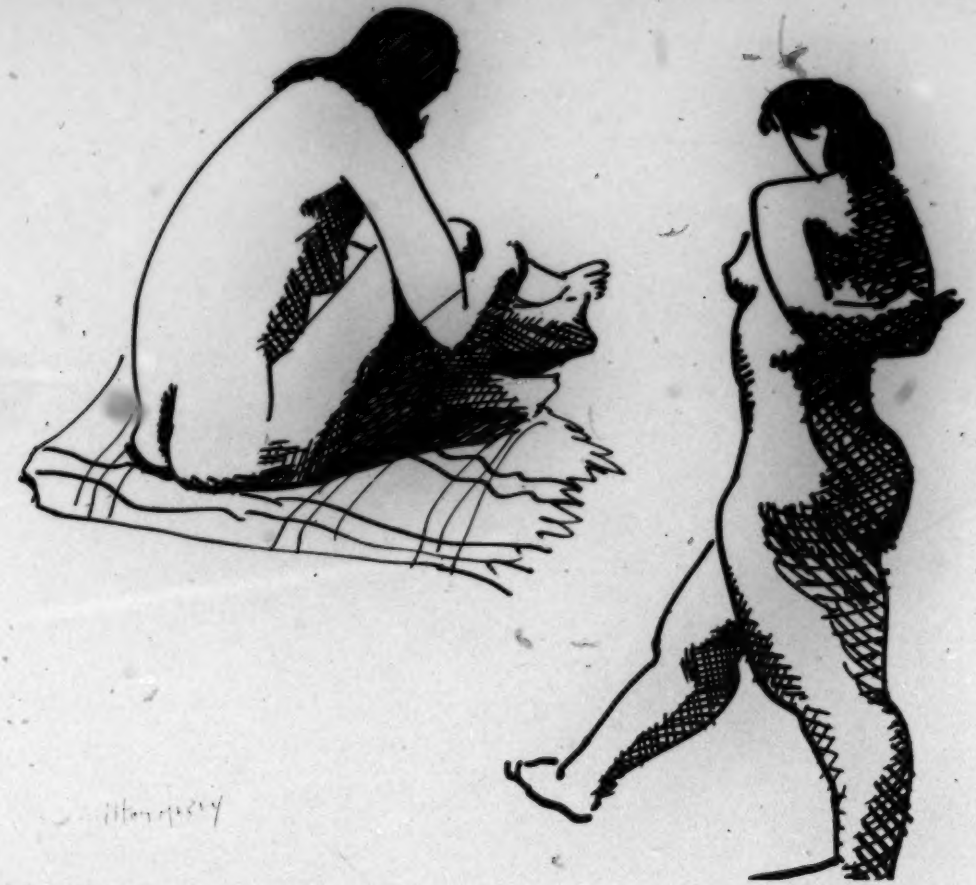
8. Hefty Girls



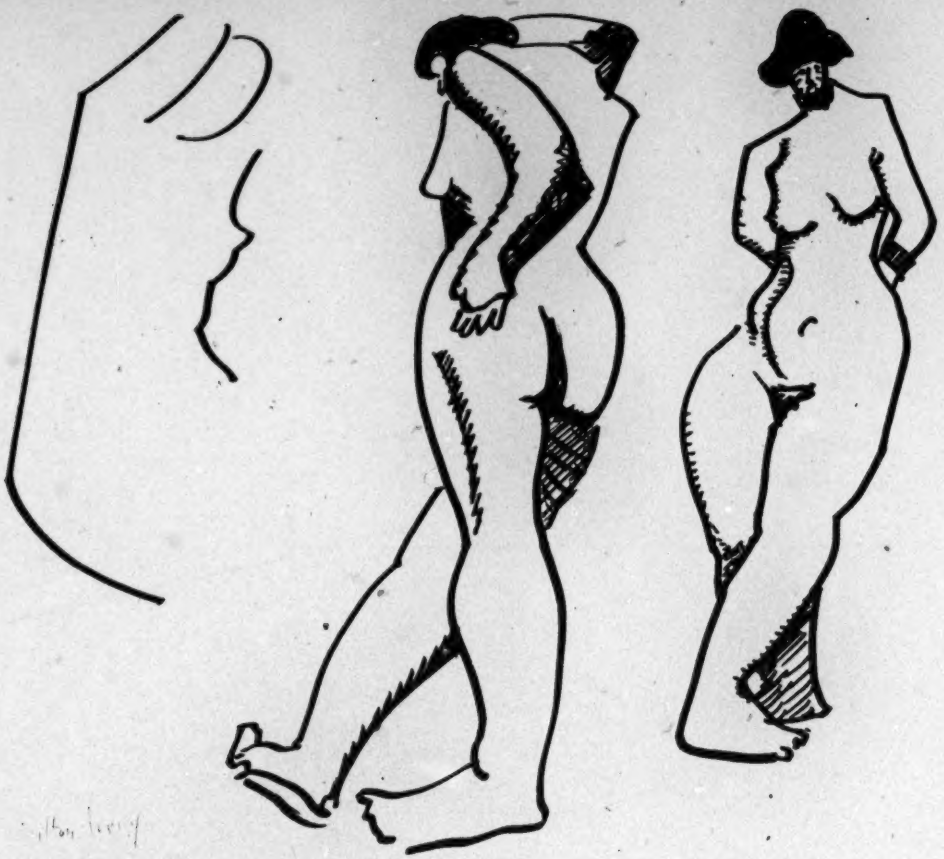
9. Dark Rocks



10. Jagged Rocks



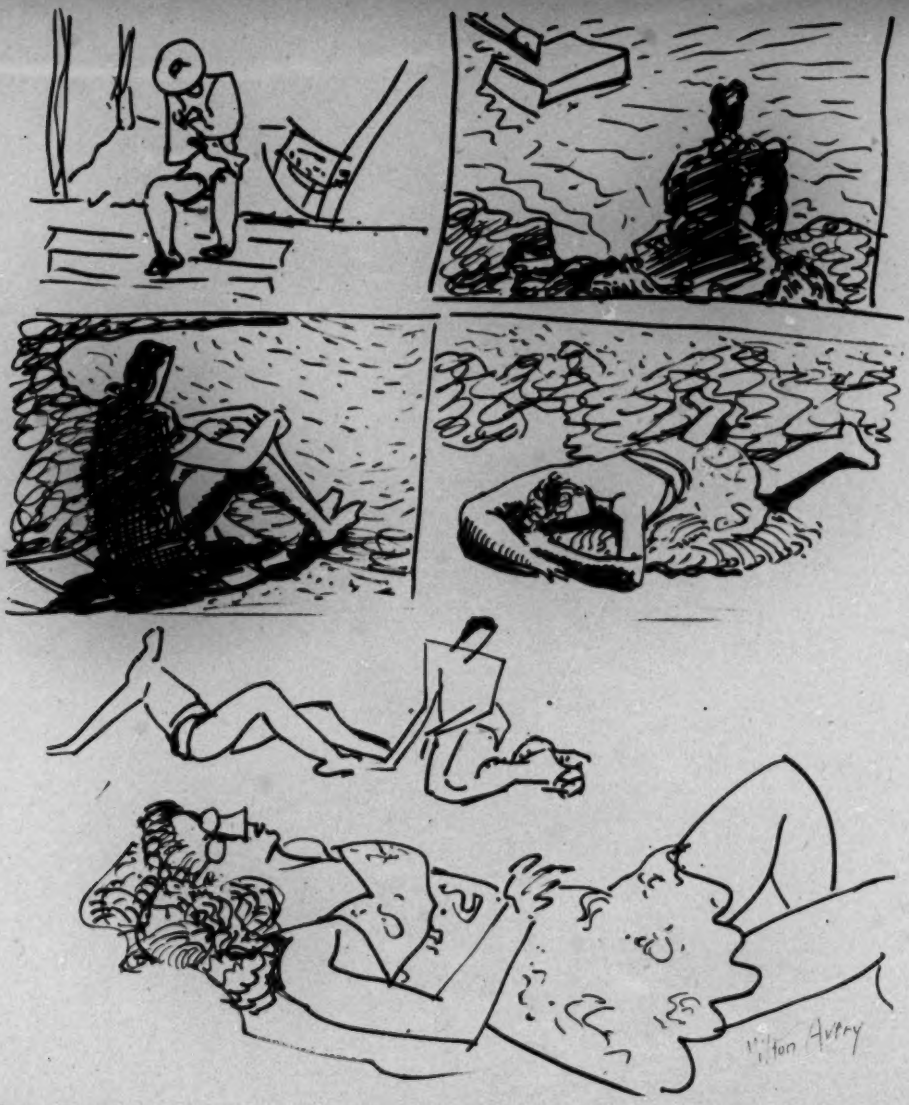
11. Sitting and Standing



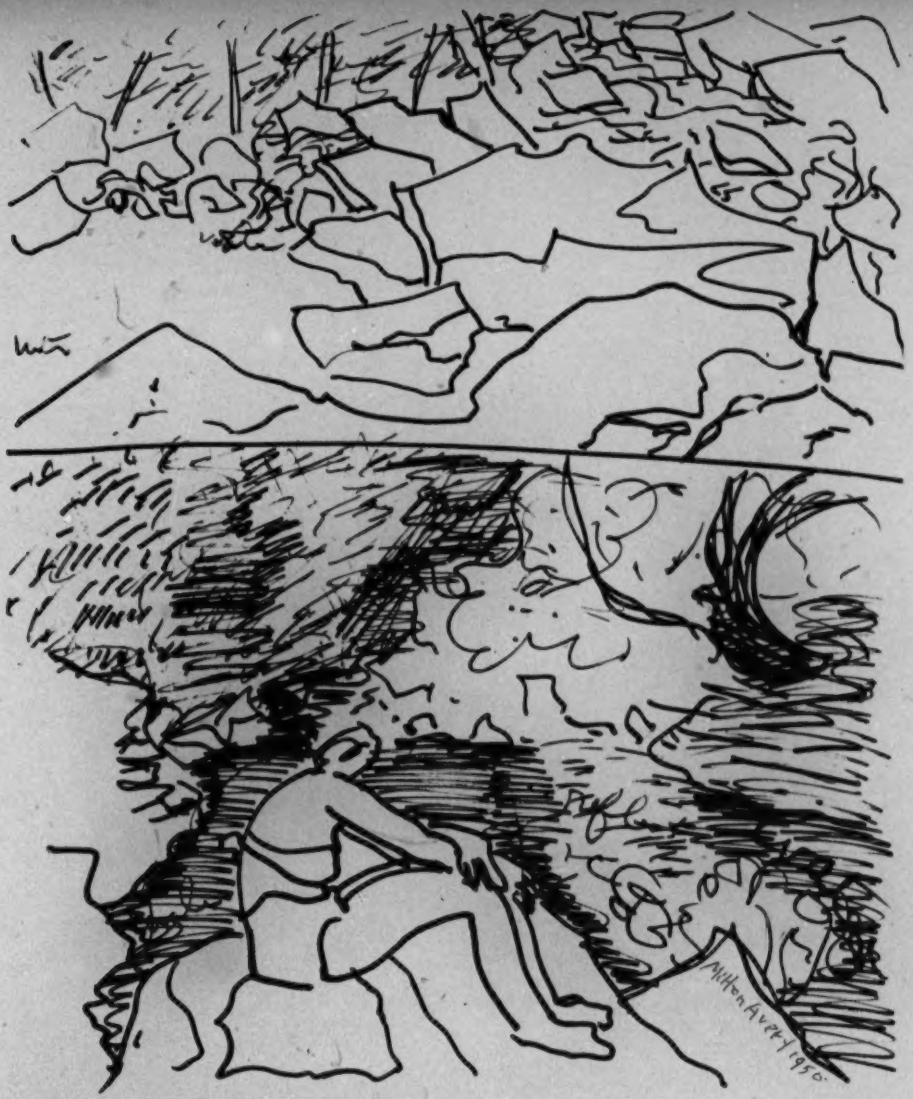
12. Three Studies

13. Shy Girl

14. Saucy Nude



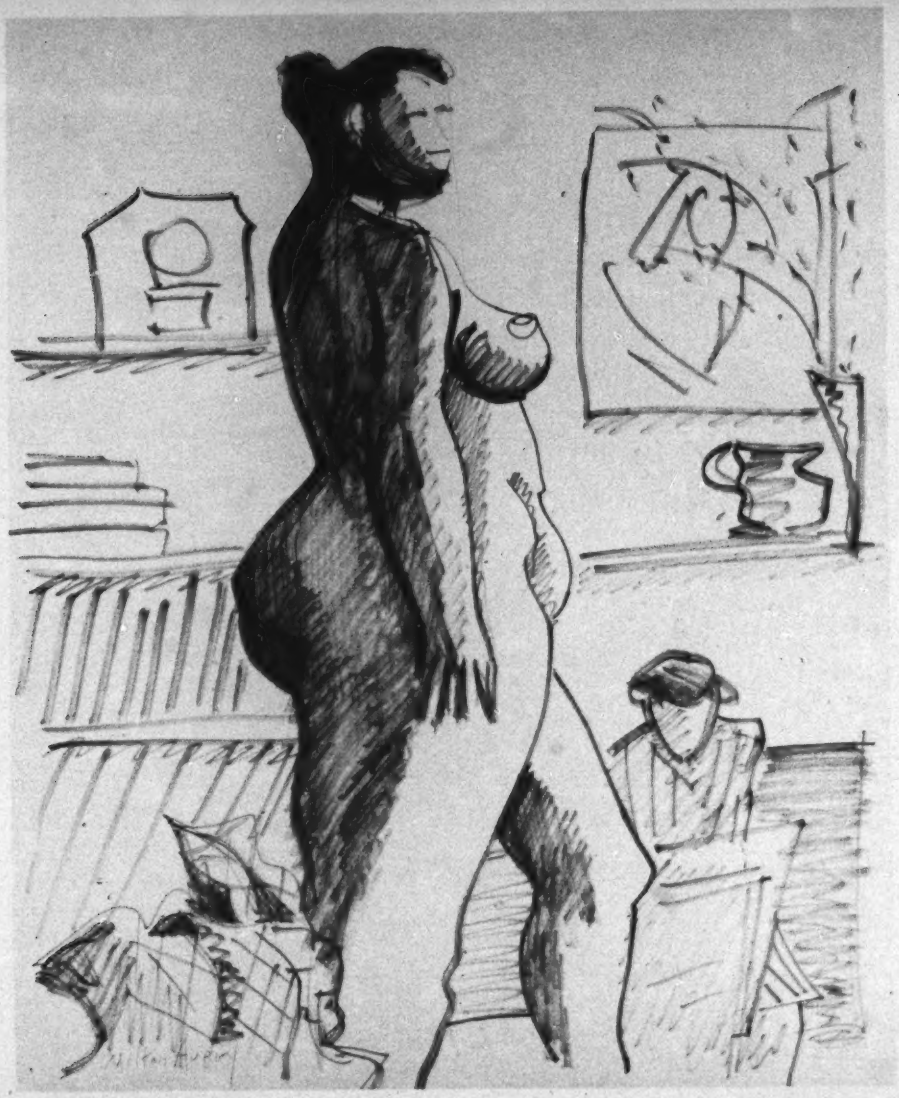
15. Beach Series



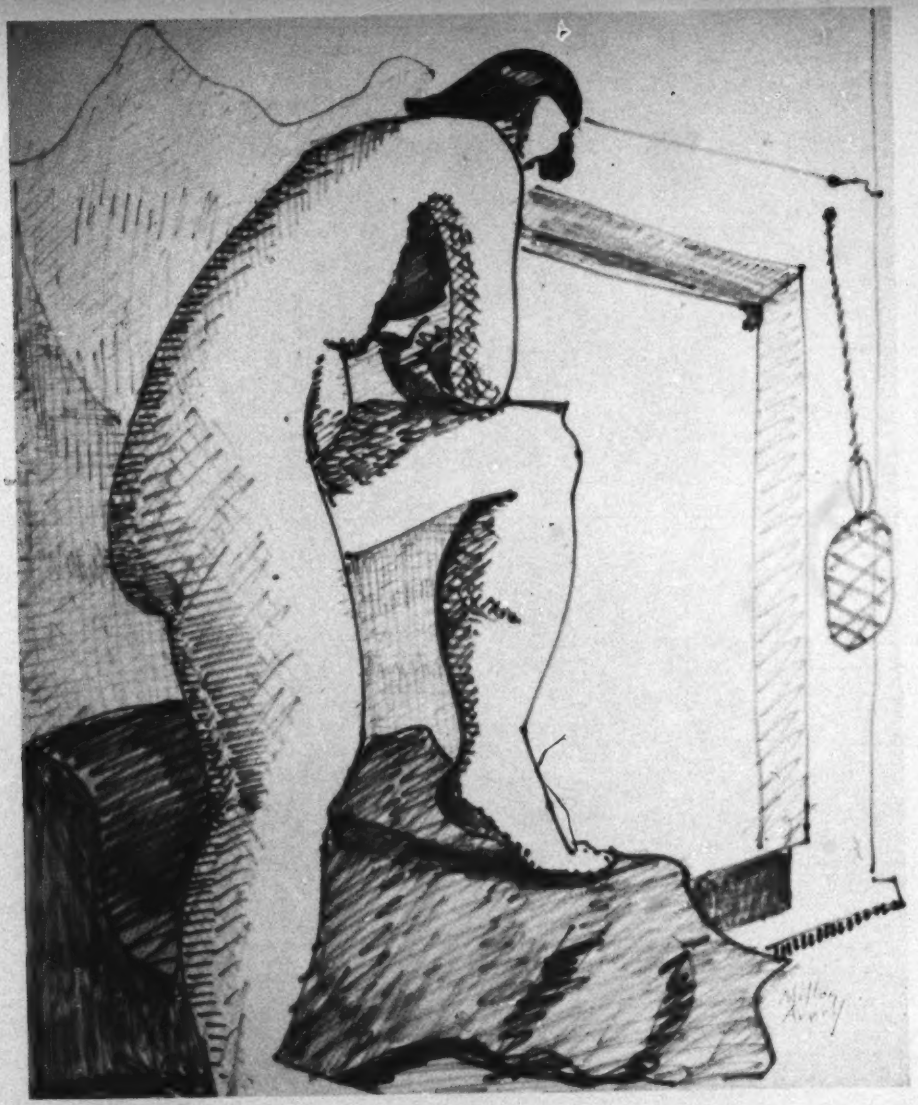
16. Quarry Bathers

31. Sketcher on the Rocks

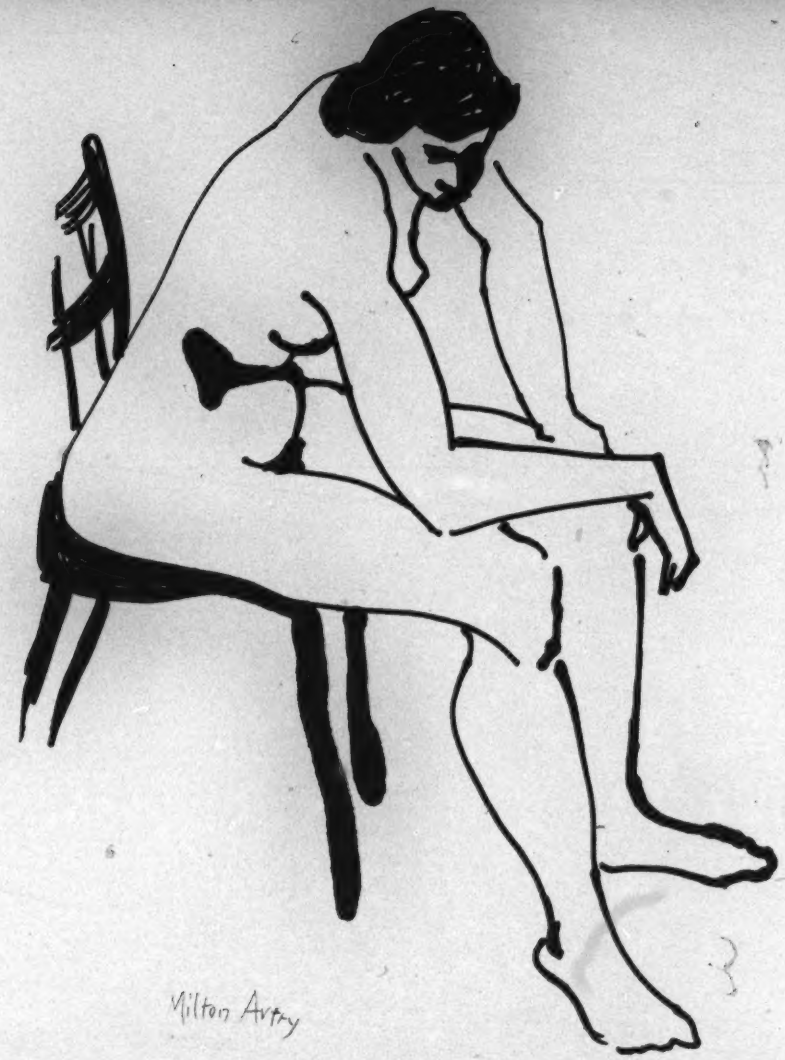
32. Sleeper by the Sea



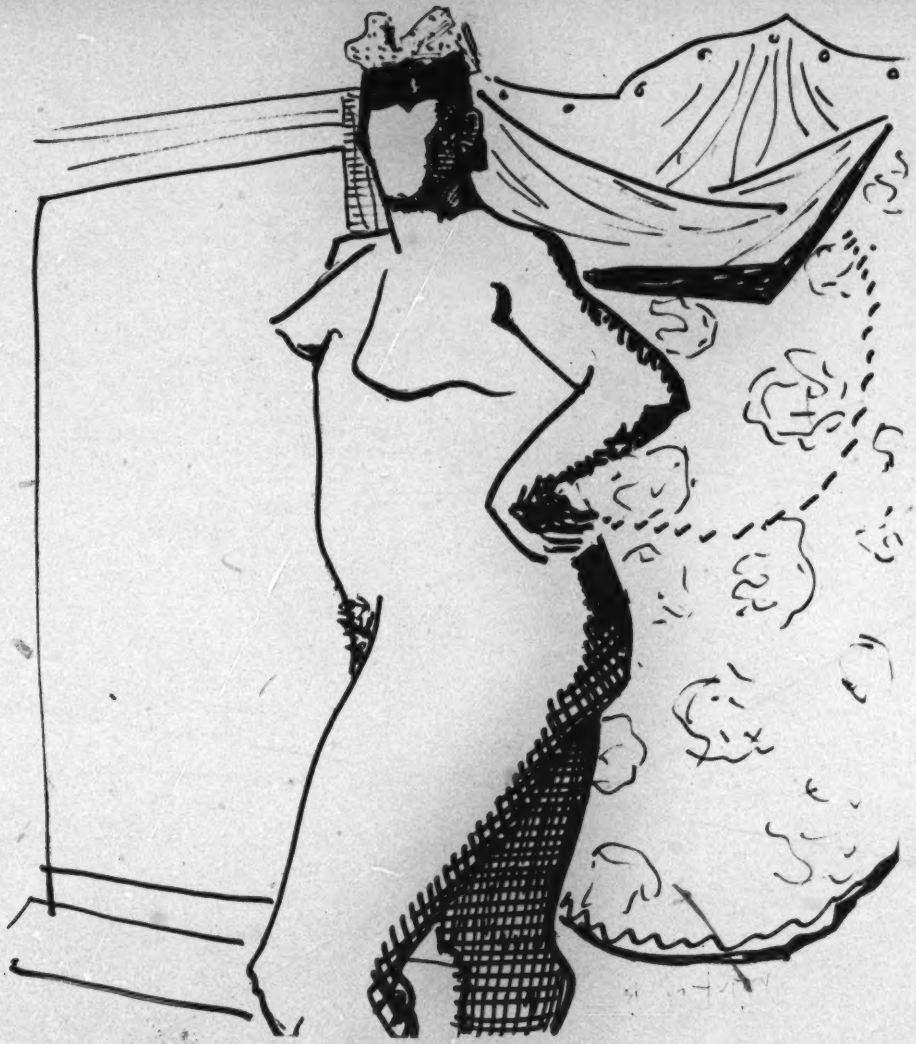
33. Formidable Woman



34. Sturdy Nude



35. **Pensive Nude**

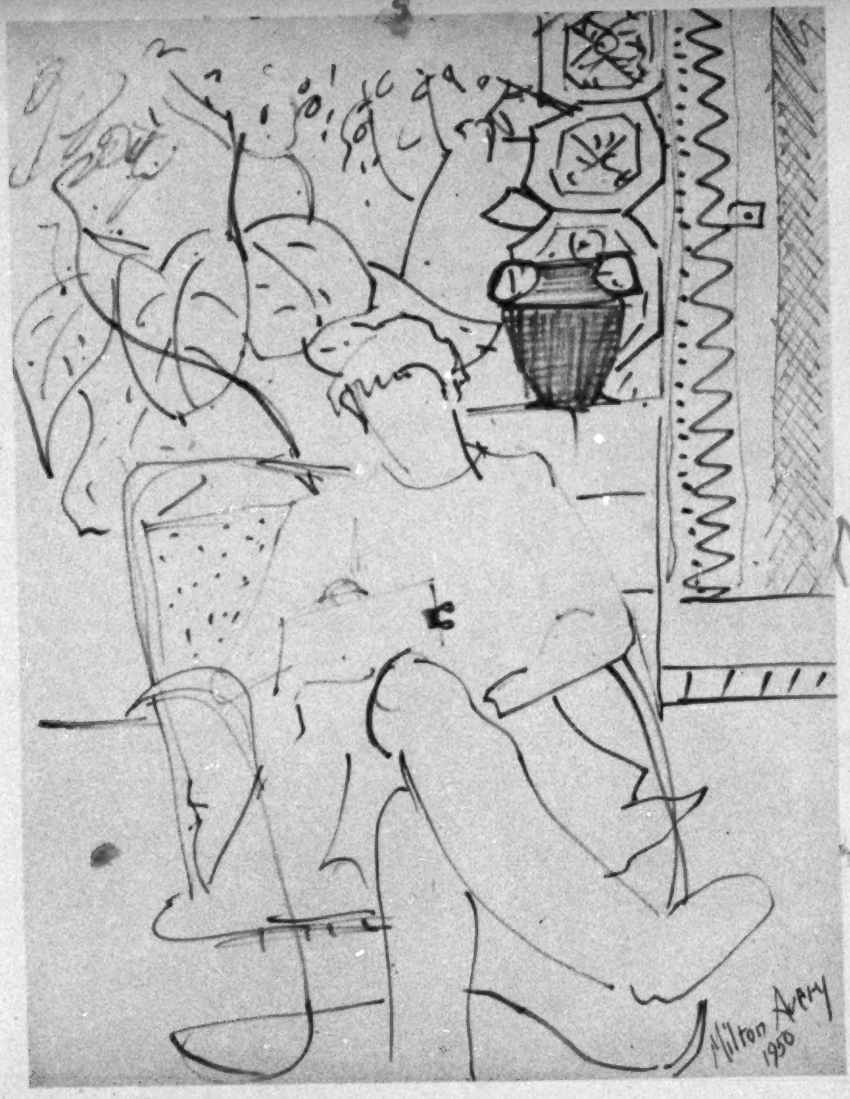


36. Amazon

37. Rocks and Sea

38. Two Seascapes

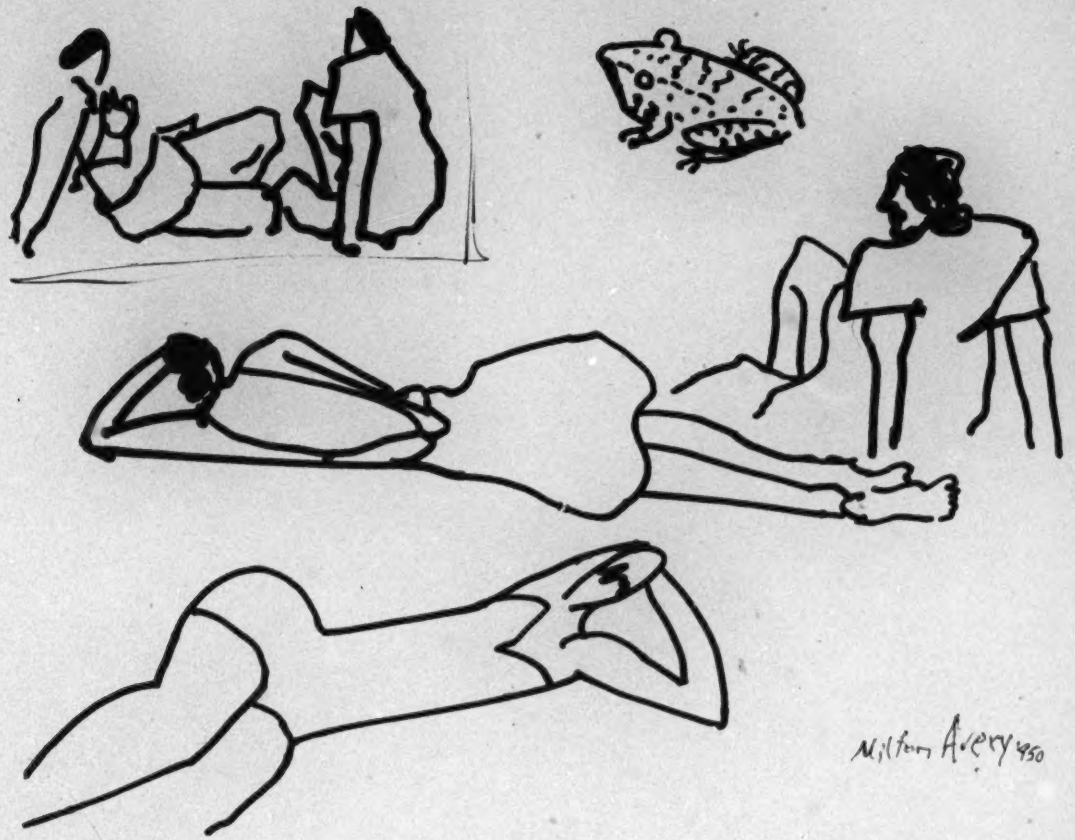
39. Victorian Interior



40. Florida Sketcher

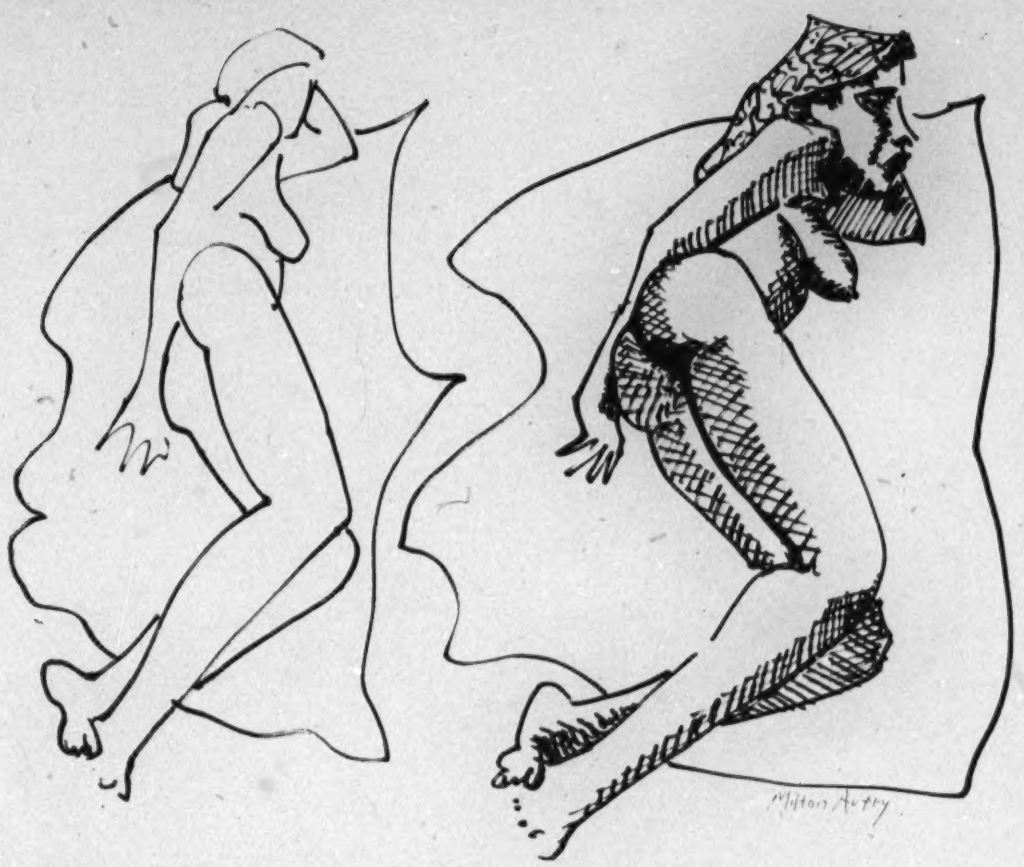
Milton Avery

41. Dolia

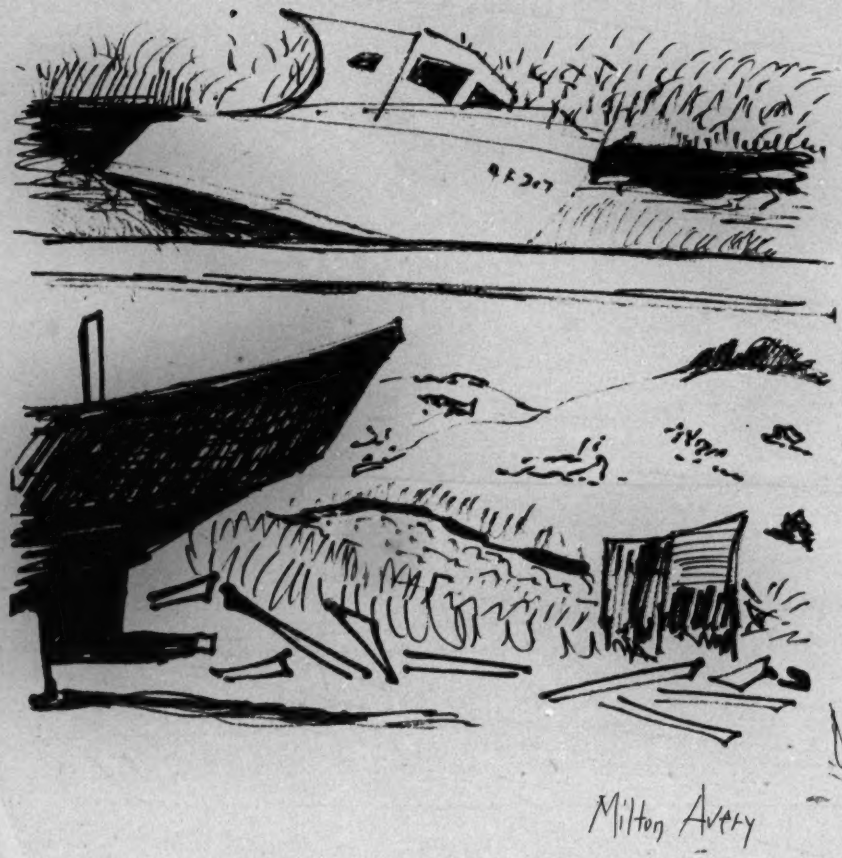


42. Figures

43. Turbaned Model

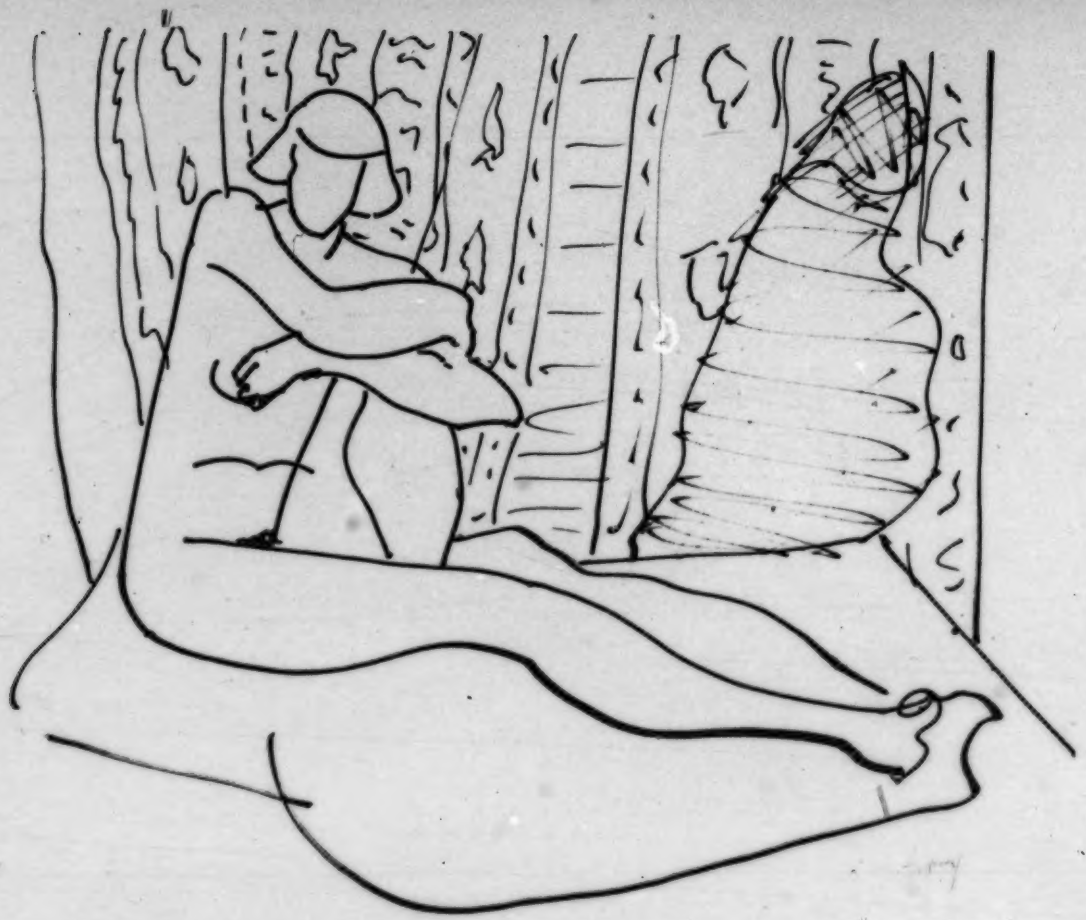


44. Two Nudes Resting



45. **Beached Boats**

46. Seagulls by the Sea

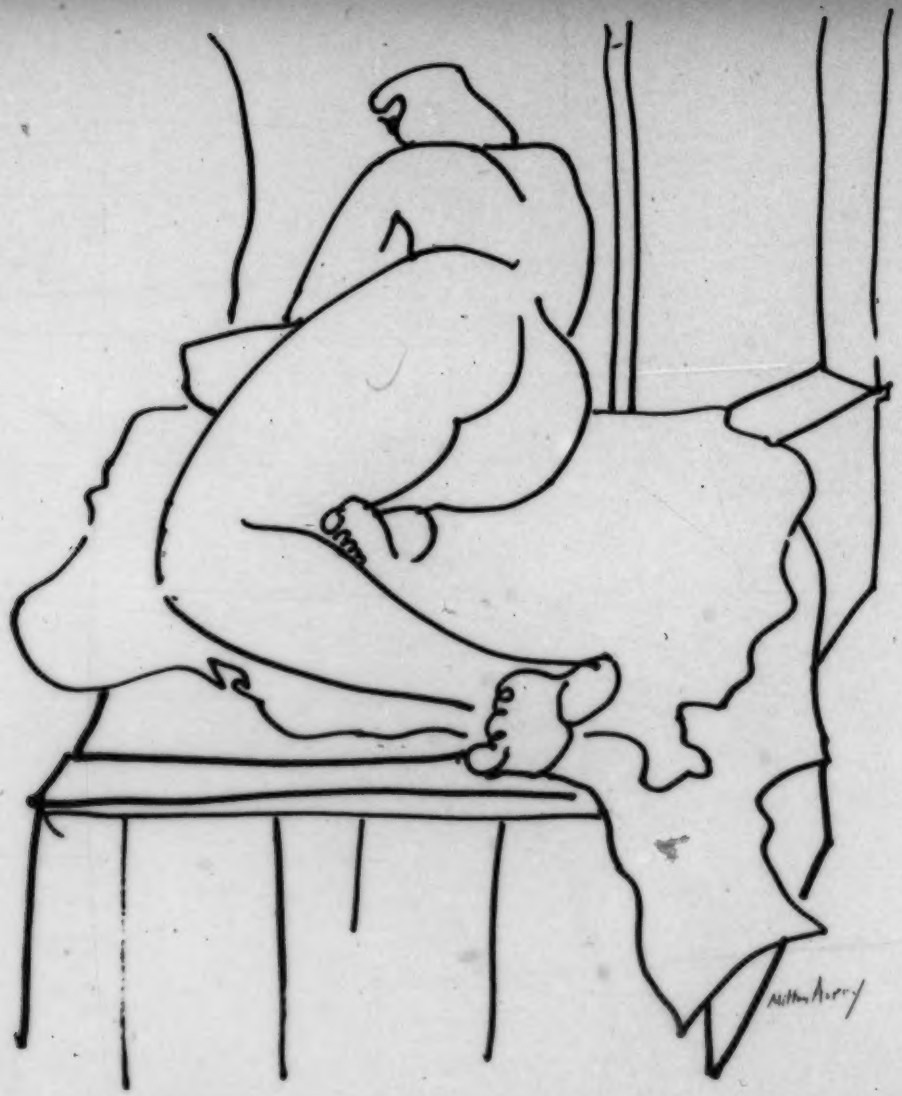


47. Nude with Folded Arms

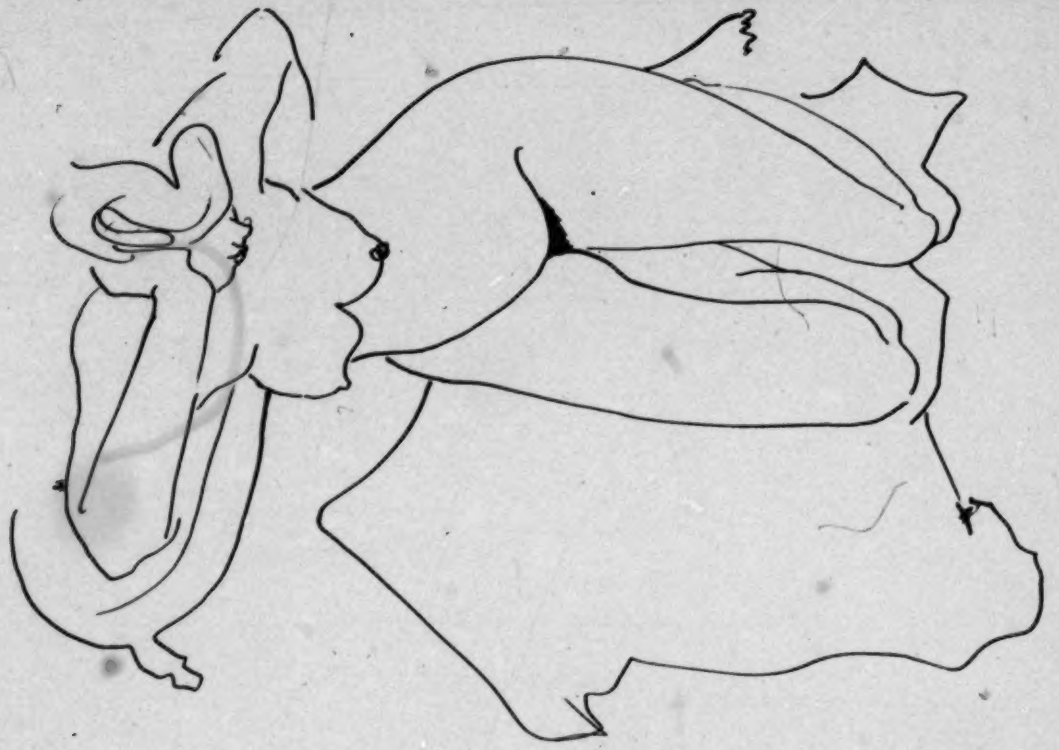
48. Nude with Robe

49. Nude Seated

50. Two Girls



51. Nude Reclining



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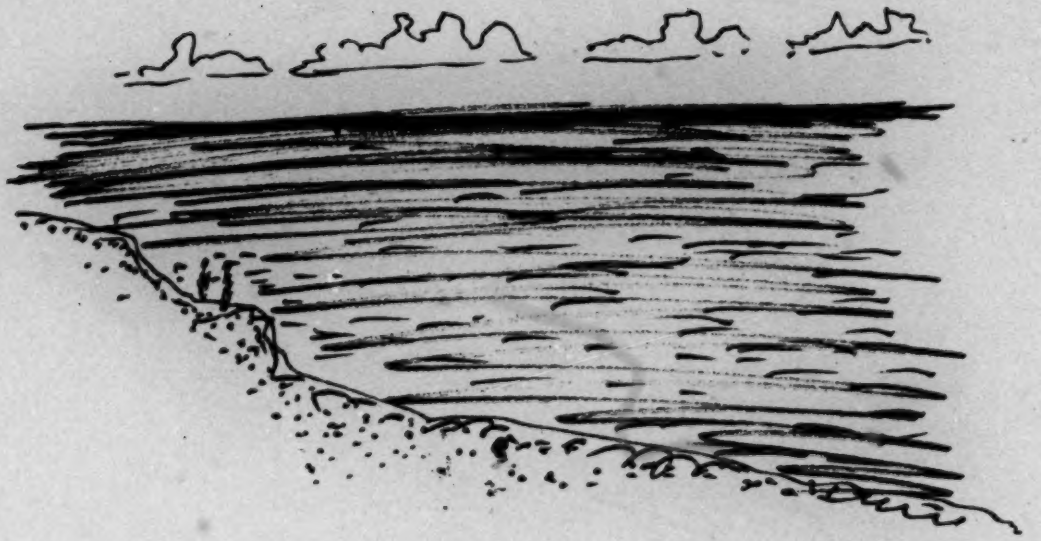

53. Sea and Dunes

54. Josephine Lake

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FOOTNOTES

1. Interview with Mrs. Sally Avery, August 20, 1973.
2. Clement Greenberg, see bibliography above, p. 201.
3. Interview with Mrs. Sally Avery, August 20, 1973.
4. Frederick Wright, see bibliography above, p. 4.
5. Ibid.
6. Hilton Kramer, see bibliography above, p. 21.
7. Albert Pinkham Ryder, *Paragraphs from the Studio of a Recluse*, *American Art, 1700-1960, Sources and Documents*, J. W. McCoubrey, ed., Englewood Cliffs, N. J. 1965, p. 187.
8. Mark Rothko, Memorial Address, New York Ethical Culture Society, January 7, 1965.

EXHIBITIONS

Major exhibitions of Milton Avery's work have been organized at the following museums and institutions:

Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, Colorado Spring, Colorado, 1946
The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C., 1943, 1944, 1952, 1965
Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon, 1947
The Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, Maryland, 1952
Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut, 1952
The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, Massachusetts, 1953
University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1954, 1966
Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Santa Barbara, California, 1954
Museum of Fine Arts of Houston, Houston, Texas, 1956
Mills College, Oakland, California, 1956, 1957
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City, 1960
The Fort Wayne Art Museum, Fort Wayne, Indiana, 1961
The Arkansas Arts Center, Little Rock, Arkansas, 1966
National Collection of Fine Arts, Washington, D.C., 1969-1970
The Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, New York, 1970
The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1973

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I wish to thank my wife Ann for her help in laying out and producing this book. Her constant support and aesthetic insight were invaluable.

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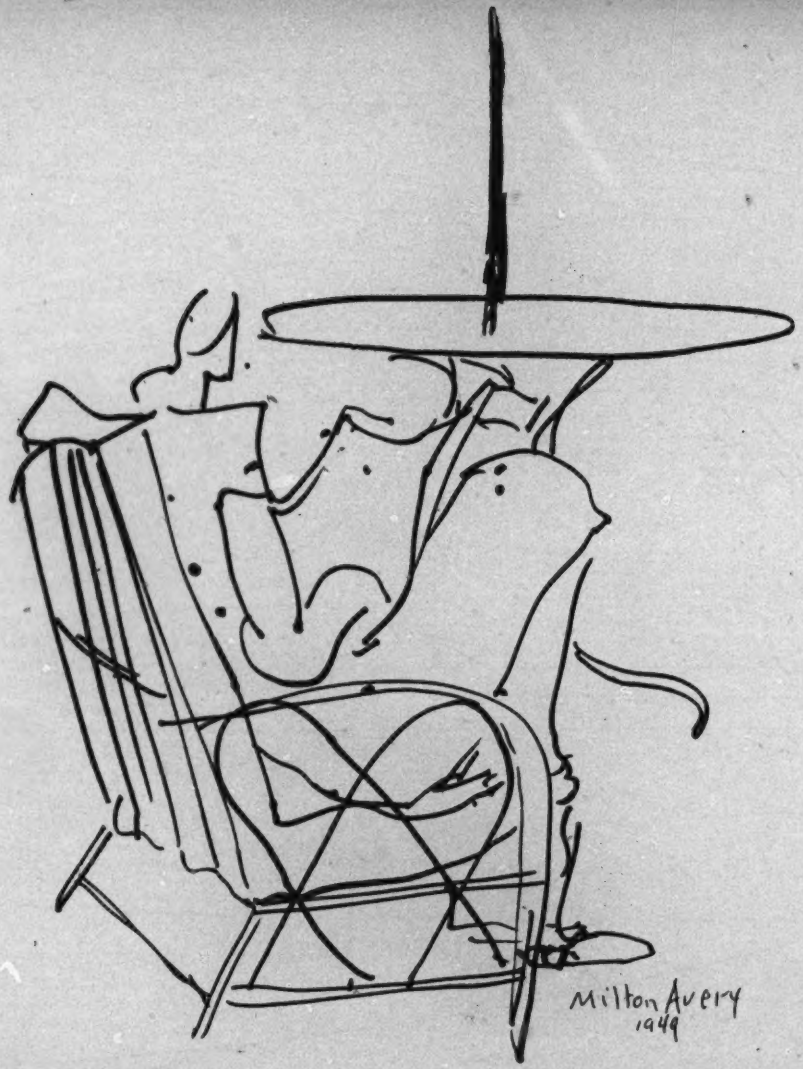
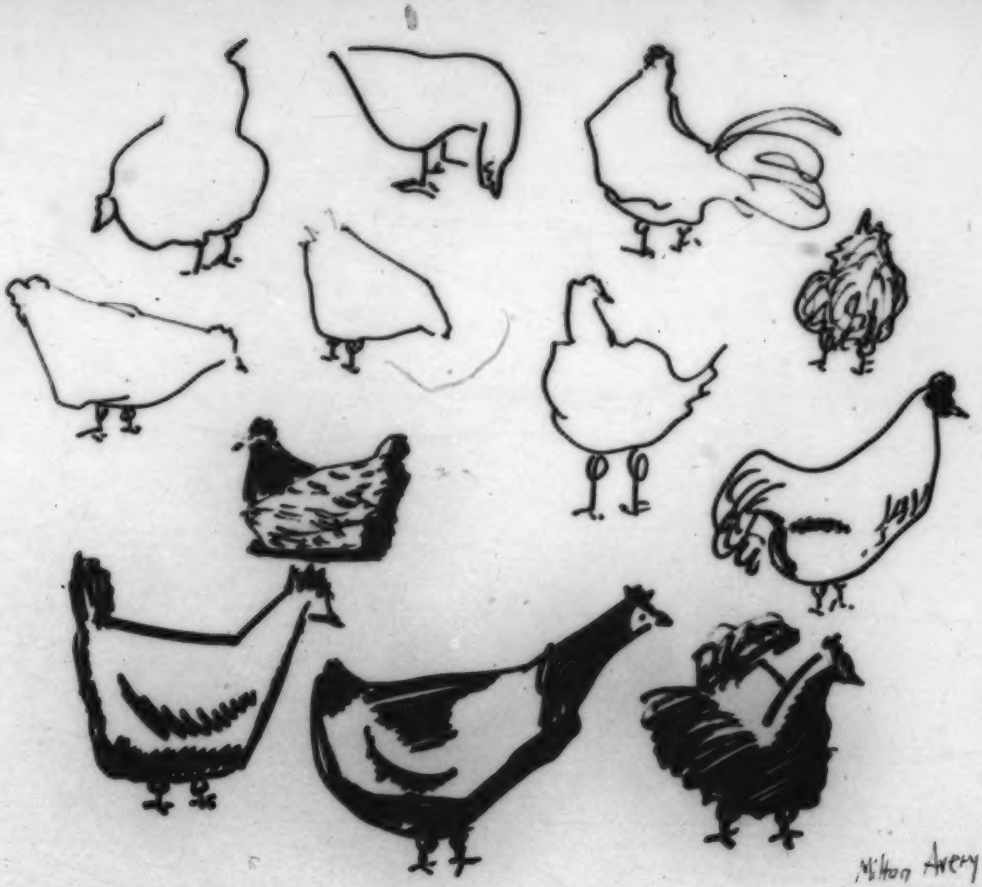


17. March Seated

18. **Mother and Daughter**

19. Still Life on Chair



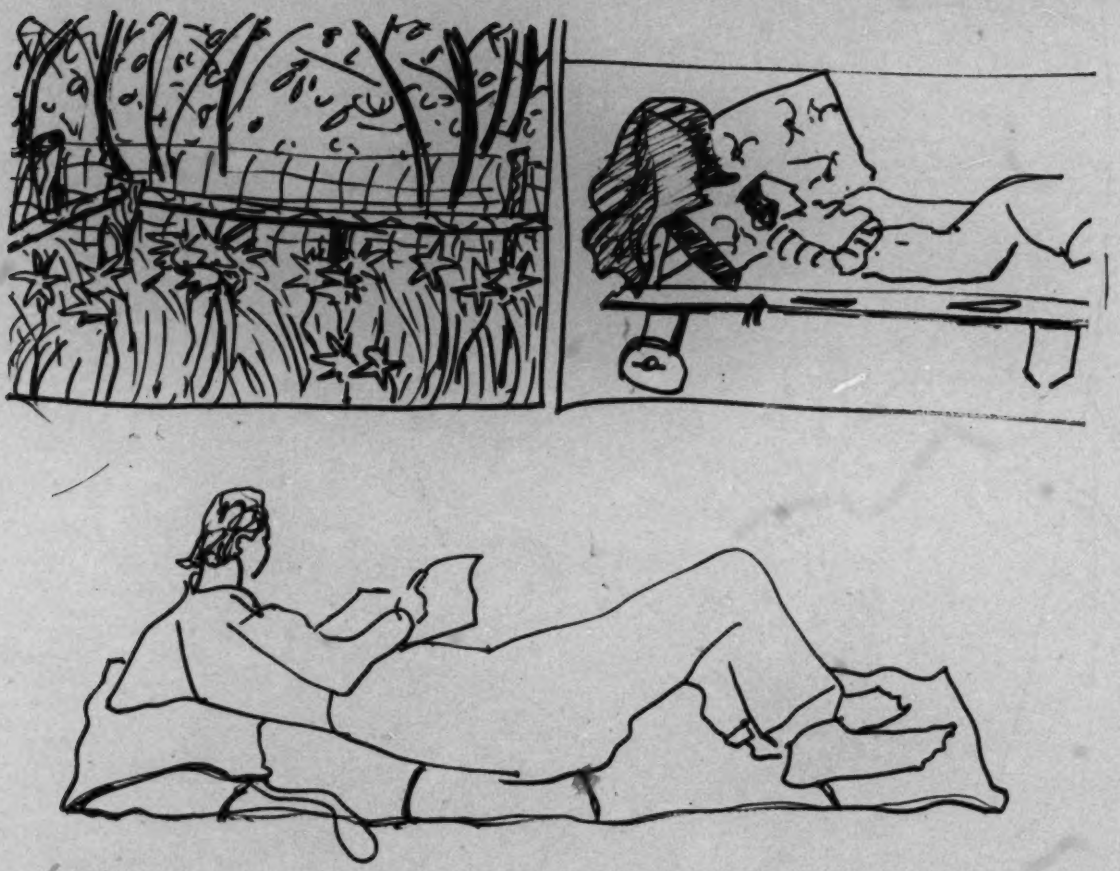
20. Chickens by the Dozen

21. Woman Alone

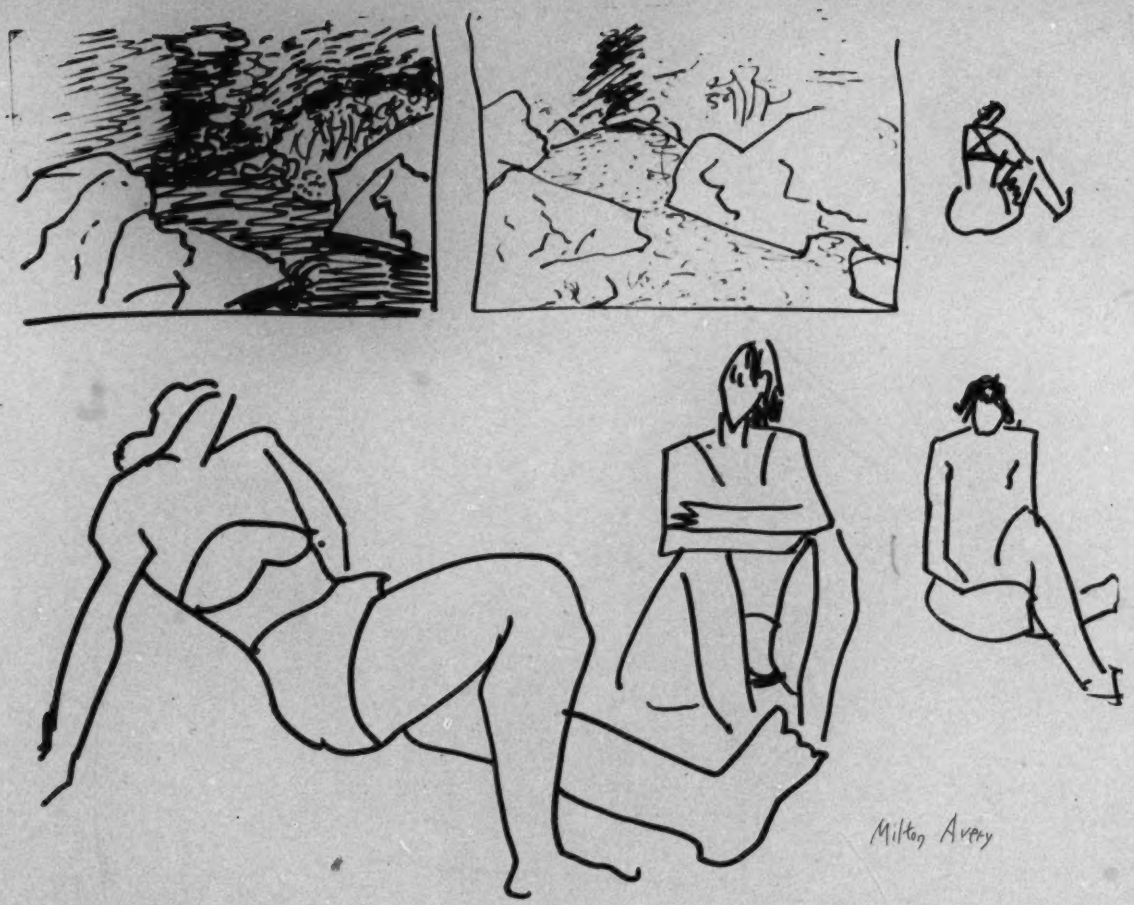
22. Draped Nude

23. More Afghans

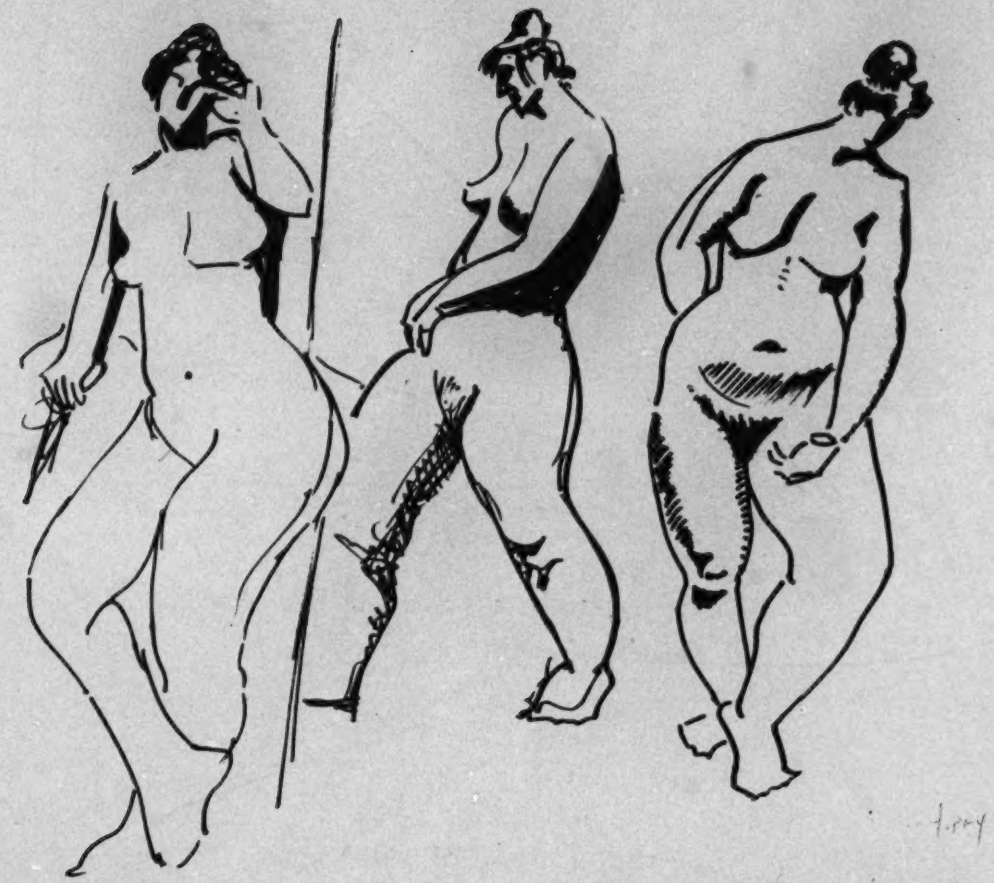
24. Afghans



25. Three Sketches



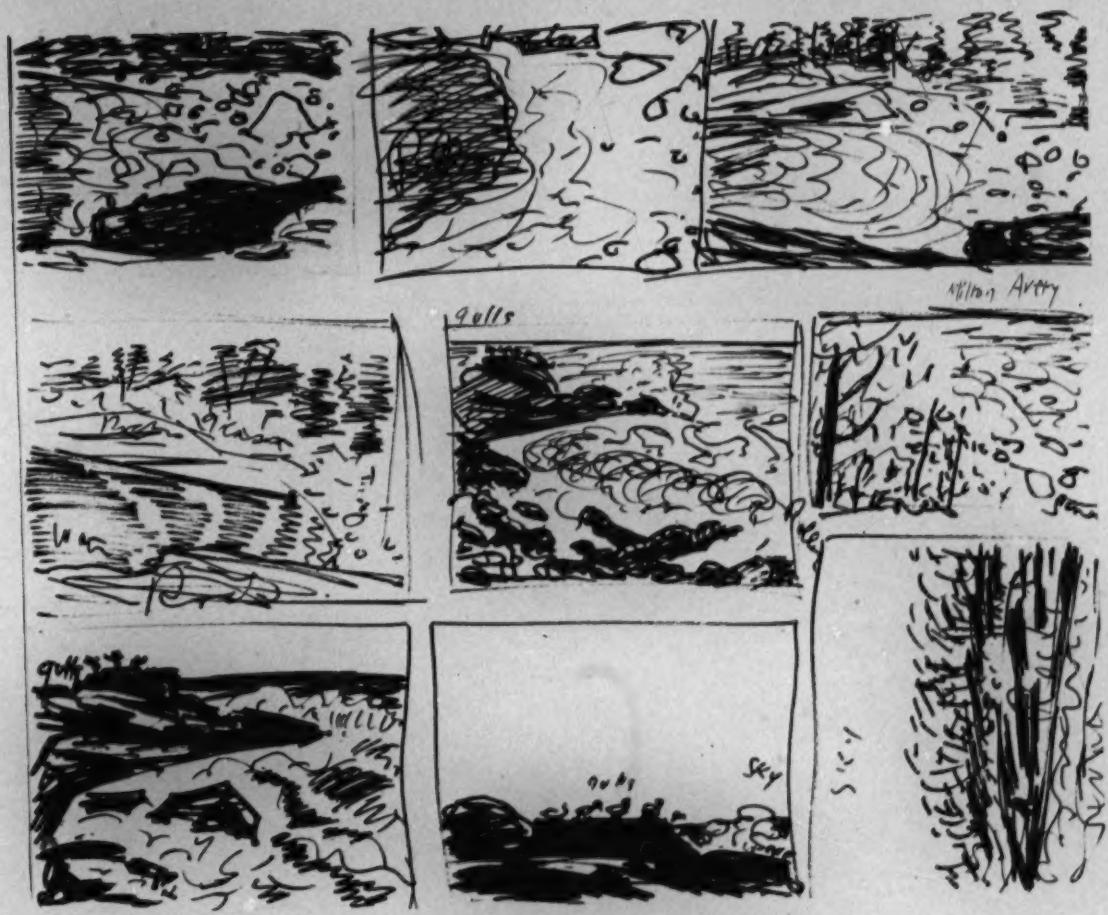
26. Six Sketches



27. Three Graces

28. Sitter by the Sea

29. Edge of Forest



30. Nine Maine Sketches